<PART II : LANGUAGE, LEARNING AND IDENTITY>Should Patriotism be Promoted, Tolerated or Discouraged in British Schools?

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Should Patriotism be Promoted, Tolerated or Discouraged in British Schools?

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There have recently been a number of calls from political leaders for the promotion of patriotism in British schools, on the grounds of a supposed connection between patriotic sentiment and social cohesion. Such calls raise some difficult questions about what should in principle and can in practice be asked of schools in the area of education for or about patriotism. These questions set the agenda for the research project reported here. The research had two components: one philosophical or normative, the other empirical or descriptive. The aims of the philosophical component were to clarify the concept of patriotism and to develop a defensible policy on whether patriotism should be promoted, tolerated or discouraged in schools. The aim of the empirical component was to assess the practical viability of this policy by investigating the views of teachers and students and asking how patriotic ideas and sentiments are currently addressed in the classroom.

WHAT IS PATRIOTISM?

Patriotism is love of one's country, and is thus a species of *emotion* or *sentiment.* It does not entail (though it may be contingently associated with) any normative beliefs about how one's country should be governed or what duties one might have to it.

Nationalism, by contrast, is a normative political belief. It is a belief, as David Archard remarks, 'about the proper consonance of nation and state; it claims that a nation should have independent sovereign statehood and that states are political communities which should be bound together by a single national identity' (Archard, 1999, p. 159). Nationalism often goes together with patriotism, but each is quite possible in the other's absence.

Nor should patriotism be confused with another normative belief whose company it sometimes keeps: the belief that we have special obligations to our fellow nationals, over and above our general obligations to all human beings. The existence of such special obligations is hotly contested in contemporary moral and political philosophy (for recent arguments in their support, see Tamir, 1993 and Miller, 1995); but a person may believe herself to have obligations of this kind without feeling any sort of emotional attachment to her country, and vice versa.

SHOULD PATRIOTISM BE PROMOTTED, TOLERATED OR DISCOURAGED IN SCHOOLS?

It follows from the above that we will not make much headway with the question of how patriotism should be handled in schools until we have addressed the question of whether, and in what ways, it is appropriate for schools to engage in the education of students' emotions. If the affective domain lies outside the legitimate province of formal education, attempts by schools to influence students' feelings about their countries will obviously be unjustified. We shall assume, however, that the standard arguments for a more generous view of the province of formal education go through. If we allow that schools are permitted in principle to try to influence students' emotions, we shall need a distinction between *rational* and *non-rational* ways of bringing such influence to bear. To influence a person's emotions rationally is to offer her good reasons for moderating or redirecting her emotional responses, to help her see why the reasons are good, and to equip her with techniques for bringing about such changes as she chooses to make on the basis of those reasons. To influence her emotions non-rationally is to deploy methods of psychological manipulation to alter her emotional responses directly, without reference to her capacities for reason-assessment and rational choice. We contend that only the first of these forms of influence is properly described as educational and justifiably brought to bear in schools.

If this is right, our question can now be reframed as follows: are there good reasons, that we can and should offer to students, for either loving or not loving one's country? Here we must note an ambiguity in the idea of there being good reasons for loving one's country. This may mean (i) that one *ought* to love one's country (and that failure to do so is a kind of mistake or failing), or (ii) that one's country is an appropriate or fitting, but nevertheless optional, object of love. We consider these possibilities in turn.

Might there be grounds for saying that one has some sort of obligation to love one's country? One problem here pertains to the commandability of emotions. Emotions would not, of course, be educable at all if we could not exert some control over them, if we did not have at least partially effective ways of fostering or tempering, indulging or suppressing them; but our control is certainly limited, and one might reasonably doubt that it is within the power of those who feel nothing at all for their countries to conjure patriotic sentiment into existence. But this objection may not be decisive. We do sometimes want to say that people ought to feel emotions they do not feel, and the 'ought' retains its force even if we accept that the missing emotions are not easily summoned. So, for example, we think that people ought to feel pity for those who suffer, grief at the loss of loved ones, fear in the face of danger and pride in their achievements. Something is awry if these emotional responses are absent. And if we currently lack the methods of emotional control needed to induce them, we have an ongoing duty to be vigilant for the emergence of such methods in the future.

Talk of what we ought to feel in certain situations is, then, intelligible enough. But the 'ought' here is not a moral one (in the narrower sense of that term): having the right feelings in the right contexts is not something we owe to others. Emotional obligations are rather prudential, in that they derive from a proper concern for our own mental health or psychological well-being. We ought to take pride in our achievements and feel pity for those who suffer

because having these feelings in these contexts is part of what it means to be mentally healthy. What this implies is that anyone wishing to make out a case for there being an obligation to love one's country would have to show that patriotism is a requirement of mental health. And while it is certainly true that a mentally healthy person must love *some* things, it is surely false that her country must be among them.

What of the second possibility, that schools might promote patriotism in the sense of offering students good reasons to believe that their countries are appropriate or fitting objects of love? The claim here is weaker and more plausible: one is not obliged to love one's country, but one's country is nevertheless the right kind of object in which to invest feelings of love. Education can be construed as an invitation to young people to explore a wide range of appropriate potential love-objects and to invest themselves in the ones to which they are most powerfully drawn: perhaps, then, countries ought to be among the potential love-objects on offer.

The crucial question here is how we are to delimit the class of appropriate or fitting objects of love. It seems fair to say that the class will be very wide: human beings are powerfully drawn to all sorts of things, and in most cases we regard the presence of powerful attraction as reason enough to love. John Wilson writes:

> We need to look up and admire, to look down and protect, to look around and feel reassured by the group with whom we can identify, and to look all about us for objects in which we can invest our emotions with love. People take up these options in varying degrees, depending on how strong their particular needs are and how far this or that option can satisfy them. This person is happiest in one role or mode, that person in another; and we should hesitate before trying to say anything general about the extent to which any person ought to go in for any option (Wilson, 1995, p. 167).

Nevertheless, there are *some* limits on the class of appropriate love-objects. One such limit is set by the idea that loving certain things may be bad for us, may be directly or indirectly damaging to our physical or mental health. So, for example, we might want to say that loving what is morally vicious, depraved or corrupt is liable to be detrimental to one's character and self-respect. There is no doubt that it is logically and psychologically possible for us to love things of which (or people of whom) we morally disapprove; but there *is* a reasonable doubt that we can do this without harm to ourselves. To love what is corrupt is itself corrupting, not least because it inclines us to ignore, forget, forgive or excuse the corruption.

And there's the rub for patriotism. Countries are morally ambiguous entities: they are what they are by virtue of their histories, and it is hard to think of a national history free from the blights of war-mongering, imperialism, tyranny, injustice, slavery and subjugation, or a national identity forged without recourse to exclusionary and xenophobic stereotypes. It is therefore not implausible to regard countries as precisely the sort of objects whose moral failings make them inappropriate objects of love. In this vein Richard Miller has recently argued for the unlearning of patriotism in US schools, on the grounds that 'a love that must constantly be nursed along with amnesia, wishful thinking and inattention to morally urgent interests is not steadfast and deep but obsessive and stultifying' (Miller, 2007, p. 14).

We do not mean to suggest that assessing the moral rectitude of nations is a straightforward

business. On the contrary, the question of how to weigh up the various kinds of vice and virtue historically and currently exhibited by countries is clearly a vexed one. And there is a further, equally vexed question about just how corrupt something needs to be before it becomes inappropriate to love it. We think these questions must be regarded as open, in the sense that they are matters of reasonable disagreement among reasonable people. And this implies that the desirability of patriotic sentiment is properly construed as a controversial issue, a topic of the sort that it is incumbent on schools to teach non-directively. Teachers can say with confidence that students are under no obligation to be patriots; but they should not say, because they do not know, whether it is a good thing for students who are drawn to their countries to love them. There are considerations in support of patriotism and considerations against, but on neither side are they decisive. The task of educators is to present the conflicting considerations as even-handedly as possible and to encourage students to form their own considered judgments on the matter.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of the empirical component of the research was to assess the practical viability of our normative proposal: that patriotism should be taught as a controversial issue in schools. Our empirical research questions were:

1. What are the views of teachers and pupils on how patriotism should be handled in schools?
2. How do teachers present and respond to patriotic ideas and sentiments in the classroom?

To answer these questions we devised a mixed method research design comprising survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. We sent out 600 student and 100 teacher questionnaires to 20 secondary schools in and around London. The sampling procedure was opportunistic: we had existing contacts with all 20 schools through their involvement in the Institute of Education's Citizenship PGCE programme, as providers of school placements for trainee teachers. We asked each school to arrange for student questionnaires to be completed by one class of Year 9 students and teacher questionnaires to be completed by five members of Citizenship and History teaching staff. Despite initial interest from the schools, we received very few completed questionnaires by the deadline we set for returns, perhaps because of the severe curriculum and examination pressures under which schools currently operate and the understandably low priority they can give to participation in research. We sent out a number of follow-up letters and emails and eventually received a total of 299 student and 47 teacher questionnaires—a return rate of just under 50%.

We then conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with 11 teachers in five schools. At least one Citizenship and one History teacher were interviewed in each school.

WHAT ARE THE VIEWS OF TEACHERS AND PUPILS ON HOW PATRIOTISM SHOULD BE HANDLED IN SCHOOLS?

The questionnaire data revealed overwhelming support among teachers and students for the proposition that, when teaching about patriotism, schools should give a balanced presentation of opposing views. 94% of teachers and 77% of students agreed or strongly agreed with this proposition; only 2% of teachers and 2% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed.

We asked participants to indicate which of five possible stances towards patriotism they thought schools should adopt. Their responses were as follows:

	Teachers (%)	Students (%)
Schools should actively promote patriotism	9	8
Schools should support patriotic views when they are expressed by students	19	16
Schools should remain strictly neutral on the issue of patriotism	47	47
Schools should challenge patriotic views when they are expressed by students	2	2
Schools should actively discourage patriotism	0	1
(Missing responses)	(23)	(25)

Again we see that a clear majority of the participants who answered this question believe that schools should remain neutral on the issue of patriotism. Very few see it as the role of the school to discourage or challenge patriotic views in pupils, though a significant minority would like schools to promote or support such views. Interestingly, while there was little support for the idea that schools' overall stance towards patriotism should be discouraging or challenging, some 74% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had an obligation to point out to students the danger of patriotic sentiments.

An open response question asking participants to explain their views on how schools should handle patriotism revealed a range of reasons for favouring a neutral stance. Some teachers appeared to regard all forms of values education as problematic: 'If schools are allowed to give opinions on patriotism they run the risk of influencing young minds and/or supporting views which may be insensitive. Schools should always be neutral—it is dangerous for teachers to put value judgments on opinions'. Others felt that any attempt to promote or support patriotism in schools was likely to be socially divisive: 'Praising patriotism excludes non-British pupils. Patriotism about being British in my experience tends to be a white preserve so divides groups along racial lines, when what we aim to do is bring pupils to an understanding of what makes us all the same'.

Students favouring a neutral stance tended to emphasise their right to choose for themselves whether or not to be patriotic: 'I think people should decide for their own and not have people telling them where they should or shouldn't be'; 'If people want to be patriotic then let them.

Don't dissuade them nor persuade them'. At least one of these students felt that the best way to protect freedom of choice was to avoid dealing with patriotism in schools at all: 'It should be a person's own choice as to whether they should be proud of their country, so there's no point to discuss it in school and influence people'. A number of students also voiced the concern about a possible link between patriotism and social division: 'It would cause arguments and fights'; 'Patriotism may be one of the causes which fuels racism which is wrong'. And this concern too was occasionally seen as grounds for avoiding the topic altogether: 'Patriotism can be hotly disputed so should not be discussed'.

It is worth noting that the general advocacy of school neutrality on patriotism did not appear to be a reflection of personal indecision about its value. More than half of the teachers and students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that it is a good thing for people to be patriotic. This suggests that participants were alert to the impropriety of equating what one personally believes to be valuable with what it is justifiable to promote in schools.

HOW DO TEACHERS PRESENT AND RESPOND TO PATRIOTIC IDEAS AND SENTIMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM?

In the interviews conducted with Citizenship and History teachers, a recurring theme was the sensitivity of the topic of patriotism and the difficulty of teaching it well: 'It's quite difficult I think, because I think it can be quite divisive . . . there is a propensity for that sort of BNP-type thinking to come through'; 'I think it's a really dodgy subject to teach, actually . . . it has to be dealt with very delicately'. One History teacher expressed acute discomfort about addressing the topic at all: 'It has come as rather a shock to me that you would be thinking about this . . . Left to my own devices I wouldn't dream of covering it really, explicitly. To me it sort of reeks of the old British Empire'.

Asked whether patriotic ideas or sentiments are ever expressed by students in the classroom, the teachers' responses varied. Some said this was unusual ('Very rarely'; 'Haven't had anything like that for a long time'), while others claimed it happened often ('Patriotism's a bit like equal opportunities: it just comes up all the time'). Several noted that patriotic sentiments were expressed more frequently by students identifying with a country of origin outside the UK: 'Our Caribbean population tends to express quite a bit of patriotism towards whatever island heritage is their background, you know, be it Trinidad or Jamaica or something like that'; 'Lots of our [immigrant] British students do feel a sort of allegiance to their country of origin, in that sort of patriotism where probably they know nothing, or very little, about their country of origin but do feel more patriotic about that country than the country they're actually living in'. And a number reported encounters with a form of patriotism verging on racism or xenophobia: 'They will express support for groups or ideas that you don't like'; 'I do get the odd kid . . . quite sort of racist, obnoxious'.

There was, however, a large measure of agreement among the teachers interviewed that the most appropriate strategy for dealing with patriotic ideas and sentiments in the classroom is open discussion combined with correction of factual errors: 'Everything is up for discussion and ev eryone's opinions are valid. We're happy to discuss it, yeah'; 'What you need to do is let

children give their different opinions and for you to give the facts rather than your opinion'; 'When we've talked about "the refugees that come and steal all of our jobs", I've tried to sort of educate them a little bit in that actually that's not the case'; 'If something is raised by a student I would discuss it . . . definitely as a teacher I would see that as my responsibility'.

CONCLUSION

Our research suggests, philosophically, that the most defensible policy on patriotism in schools is to teach it as a controversial issue, and, empirically, that this policy is a viable one, given the general support among teachers and students for school neutrality on patriotism and the current practice of addressing patriotic ideas in the context of open discussion. Recent calls by political leaders for the promotion of patriotism in schools lack a sound philosophical justification and run counter to the views of most teachers and students.

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